Colonel Andrew Jackson May: Eastern Kentucky's Plumed Knight of the Confederacy

by Robert Perry

If large families are a sign of marital bliss, the period from 1809 to 1833 was a happy one for Samuel May and his wife Catherine. Records show that during those years she bore him six sons and eight daughters. Nine of these children, including his fourth, fifth, and sixth sons, were born at the May House in North Prestonsburg, which in those days was the hub of his four-hundred-acre farm. Like most frontiersmen, Samuel was a loyal Democrat and a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, the champion of backwoods causes on Capitol Hill. Therefore, when Catherine bore him his fourth son on January 28, 1829, he named the boy after his hero, who was just beginning his first term as president. In thirty-two years the boy would become Colonel Andrew Jackson May, the man Henry Scalf called "the plumed knight of the Southern cause in the Big Sandy Valley."

Like his father, Jack May was a man of exceptional courage, unbending integrity, and driving ambition. He had the bad luck, however, to come of age when his father's business empire was collapsing. Dealt such a hand, it was inevitable that he should dream of recouping the family fortune. When news reached Prestonsburg in 1849 that gold had been discovered in California, it was probably twenty-year-old Jack May, not his father, who first rose to the bait. Whatever the case, we know with certainty that when Samuel headed west in 1849, he took Jack with him, and "another young man named White." A photograph of Jack from this period shows a sharp-featured young man with a determined expression and a glorious mane of red hair.

The story of Samuel's death in the goldfields has already been told, so I won't repeat it here, except to say that his final hours were eased by his son's selfless devotion. When Samuel died in 1851, Jack buried him near their rude cabin in the Sierras and returned to Prestonsburg, where his mother was probably still living. There he began studying for the law. He was licensed to practice in 1854, and in 1855 he married Matilda Davidson, the daughter of a prosperous Floyd County farmer. By 1860, according to Paintsville historian John B. Wells III, Jack was practicing law in West Liberty, a town thirty-five miles west of Prestonsburg in Morgan County.

A fervent Democrat like his father, Jack supported the Confederacy from the start, and it was partly due to his influence that the region contributed heavily to its armies. Records show that on October 21, 1861, he was elected captain of Company A of the 5th Kentucky Infantry, C.S.A., a unit he had personally recruited. According to the pro-Confederate Louisville Courier, the 5th was composed of "hardy, raw-boned, brave mountaineers" who were "burning with desire to drive out the Abolition hordes of King Lincoln, who have dared to invade the sacred soil of Kentucky."

Although Captain May's company was mustered at West Liberty, the main body of the 5th was organized at Prestonsburg by former Congressman John M. Elliott and other local politicians. Records show that on October 2, 1861, these men sent a telegram to President Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia, asking him for immediate assistance. They informed him that more than one thousand volunteers had gathered at Prestonsburg, and urgently requested that he send them officers so that these men could be trained for battle. Scalf says that the recruits were drilled in "a field north of town"--probably the meadow below the May House. During this period, according to Wells, the house served both as a recruitment center and as the temporary headquarters of Colonel John S. Williams, the first commander of the regiment.

On September 15, 1861, William T. Sherman, the ranking Union commander at Louisville, ordered William "Bull" Nelson, the commander of Camp Robinson in Garrard County, to go to Maysville, organize a force, and drive the 5th Kentucky out of the Big Sandy Valley. On October 23, 1861, Nelson's command, consisting of four Ohio regiments and an assortment of Kentucky volunteers and militiamen, marched from Maysville to West Liberty, where they engaged Captain May's company in a brief skirmish. With Nelson's columns in pursuit, May then marched his men up the Pound Gap Road to Prestonsburg, bivouacked them at the May Farm, and began looking for a place to make a stand. By this time, Colonel Williams had moved the main body of the 5th to Pikeville.

Recalling how the narrow defile at Thermopylae had helped a small Greek army defeat a much larger army of Persians, May decided to make his stand at Ivy Narrows, a stretch of road between Prestonsburg and Pikeville. On Ivy Mountain, located across the river from the road, was a level benchland overlooking the narrow pass. Here May built breastworks and positioned the larger part of his company. While he fortified the position, he was joined by Colonel Williams and the other regiments of the 5th Kentucky, making a total of approximately five hundred men. Then, mounting his horse, he galloped over to the road and began scouting for the enemy. To his company he shouted, "Don't fire until you hear my pistol crack."

Nelson's force reached Prestonsburg on November 5, 1861. After a brief pause, they continued up the Pikeville road in search of Williams' Confederates. On November 8th they found them. Recognizing that Williams had picked a favorable place to fight, Nelson wheeled his two cannons to the river's edge and aimed them at the main rebel position. Then he ordered Colonel Harris and his troops to cross the river out of range and deploy along the mountainside, and sent Colonel Marshall's regiment up the road in a frontal attack. When the Federals came within range, May's pistol cracked, the Confederate line erupted in fire, and the battle began.

The first volley was a bloody one. In his battle report, written at Pikeville several days later, Nelson wrote:

> The skirmish was very sharp. The mountainside was blue with puffs of smoke, and not an enemy to be seen. The first discharge killed four and wounded thirteen of Marshall's men. I ordered the Kentuckians to charge. Colonel Harris, whose regiment was immediately behind me, led his men up the mountainside most gallantly, and deployed them along the face of it.

According to Nelson, the battle lasted for an hour and twenty minutes. The Confederates weren't dislodged from their position until a third Federal regiment under Colonel Norton climbed the northern side of the mountain, reached the crest, and descended on the rebels from their rear. When Norton's men pressed their attack, May's company and the other Confederate units gave ground and beat a hasty retreat across the Ivy Creek bridge. In the confusion, some were pushed off the bridge and into the shallow water. However, says Scalf, "the retrograde movement did right itself enough to prevent utter disaster." After the Confederates had gone several miles up the road toward Pikeville, they blocked their retreat by felling trees and destroying bridges.

According to PCC history professor Tom Matijasic, the best evidence shows that during the battle, six Union soldiers were killed and twenty-four were wounded. Confederate casualties were ten killed, fifteen wounded, and forty missing.

According to Marshall Davidson of Prestonsburg, the Battle of Ivy Mountain was fought on and around the farm of Samuel Davidson (1800-1854), Jack May's father-in-law. Marshall's family preserves the tradition that during the battle, Samuel's children crossed the Big Sandy in a boat in order to avoid being hit by rifle fire. The Davidson farm enclosed land now occupied by the present town of Ivel. Oldtimers say that the battleground was located several hundred yards north of the present Ivel post office and immediately west of the Wagon Wheel restaurant. When Highway 23, the main route between Prestonsburg and Pikeville, was widened in 1971, most of this battleground, which had formerly been marked by a cemetery and a flagpole, was permanently destroyed.

Although the Battle of Ivy Mountain was a Confederate defeat, it did delay Nelson's progress enough to allow Williams to withdraw his troops from Pikeville and establish a winter camp at Pound Gap. After occupying the town, Nelson decided not to pursue the rebels any farther, reasoning that their lack of supplies and the lateness of the season would make a counter-attack unlikely. He then withdrew his troops from the region. The Ohio regiments were marched down the valley to Louisa and put aboard steamboats bound for Louisville, and the Kentucky regiments were marched back to Maysville and Lexington. After several weeks of near starvation at Pound Gap, the 5th Kentucky was joined by General Humphrey Marshall's Virginia regiments, which passed through Pound Gap in December, 1861 and reoccupied the valley as far as Paintsville.

At Ivy Mountain Jack May earned a reputation for bravery, and subsequent exploits added to his fame. On February 23, 1862, operating from his base at Pound Gap, he led a raid down Left Beaver and attacked Union partisans camped at the head of Big Mud Creek. By the spring of 1862, according to Tazewell County historian William C. Pendleton, May's 5th Kentucky was part of a small Confederate army encamped directly east of Jefferson-ville, Virginia. Commanded by General Humphrey Marshall, it consisted of three infantry regiments, a battalion of cavalry, and a battery of artillery.

On April 18, 1862, Jack May was promoted to Colonel. Several weeks later, a Union force commanded by General Cox left Charleston, Virginia and marched south up the New River Valley. Cox's objective was the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, a line running through Wytheville, Marion, and Abingdon. The shortest route between Richmond and Memphis, it was a vital link between the eastern and western theaters of the war. On May 16th, 1862, at Princeton, Virginia, the Federals encountered Marshall's Confederates, two companies of which were commanded by Colonel A. J. May. After some fierce fighting, Cox's army was defeated and forced to retreat.

On October 20th, 1862, May resigned his commission "for health reasons." However, his subsequent actions show that his real reason was to recruit a cavalry regiment for mountain service. During the fall and winter of 1862-63, he canvassed the Big Sandy Valley in search of good men and good mounts, and in the spring of 1863, according to Wells, he used the May House as his recruiting center. Moreover, a letter from this period shows that whenever Colonel May's outfit passed through Prestonsburg, it camped "around the race course in front of the house."

By July, 1863, according to Pendleton, Colonel May's newly-organized 10th Kentucky Cavalry was camped at the Henry Bowen farm, known as Bowen's Cove, located seven miles northeast of Tazewell, Virginia. The rolling hills of Tazewell County are verdant pasture land, and during the war its farmers and ranchers supplied the Confederate government with thousands of horses, cattle, sheep, and hogs. The region was also important for other reasons. The South's chief lead refinery was located at Wytheville, and King's saltworks in Smyth County supplied the entire Confederacy east of the Mississippi.

On July 15th, 1863, Tazewell County was unexpectedly invaded by one thousand Federal Cavalry under Brigadier General John Toland. Coming up the Tug River into Abb's Valley, Toland's men moved rapidly, stopping from time to time to burn farms, confiscate horses, and destroy military stores. At the William Peery farm, for example, they destroyed several boxes of old Kentucky rifles. The first resistance to Toland's raid was mounted by Colonel A. J. May. About ten a.m. on the 16th, four hours after Toland's men had burned Peery's rifles, Colonel May and fifty mounted men galloped past Peery's farm in pursuit of the Federals. Drawing on eyewitness testimony, Pendleton says:

> Colonel May was riding rapidly at the head of the column, and was carrying a pennant or small flag. From his manner, he seemed to say with his flag: "Follow me!" They were following him compactly and eagerly. The Colonel was every inch a soldier, and his men were as fearless as their leader.

On the morning of July 17th, according to Pendleton, May and his men attacked the rear guard of Toland's force at Stony Creek, six miles northwest of Wytheville. During the encounter several Federals were killed and several others were taken prisoner.

May attacked Toland again on the following day. On July 18th, according to Tazewell County historian Louise Leslie, May's men, riding at full gallop, overtook Toland's rear guard as it passed along the south side of Walker's Mountain. This time the Confederates killed three Federals, captured twenty, and liberated Captain Joel E. Stallings and forty Confederate infantrymen, whom the Federals had captured during their march up Abb's Valley. David Johnston, in his History of the Middle New River Settlements (Huntington, 1906), says that the prisoners were liberated by "a bold charge made by Colonel A. J. May at the head of his Kentucky Cavalry."

Edward O. Guerrant, one of General Marshall's staff officers, thought Colonel A. J. May was "as brave as Julius Caesar." Following the Battle of Walker's Mountain, May and his men continued to distinguish themselves. In November, 1863, they participated in Longstreet's seige of Knoxville, and in May, 1864, they were attached to the famous cavalry command of John Hunt Morgan. Under Morgan they participated in the famous "Last Kentucky Raid" and fought at Mount Sterling and Cynthiana. Then, on July 4, 1864, May resigned his commission a second time, complaining of "a chronic inflammation of the bladder."

After the war, Colonel May moved his family to Tazewell, Virginia and opened a law practice. No doubt he intended to cash in on his reputation as Tazewell County's best-known military hero. He had no trouble finding clients, and by the 1890s he was a wealthy man and a pillar of the community. W. Bland Leslie, editor of the town's newspaper during those years, later recalled:

> Nearly every fellow that amounted to anything in those days had a good horse and buggy, and I remember so well the military bearing of Col. A. J. May as he would ride down to his office each morning on his black horse, dismount on the stile, and Fielding Floyd's father would be there to take the horse back home.

Colonel May and his wife Matilda raised six children, four of whom reached adulthood: Byrd May, Samuel Davidson May, and Andrew Jackson May, Jr., all of Tazewell, and Mrs. Mary Catherine Steele of Washington County, Virginia. Matilda died in 1900. Two years later, exhibiting the audacity that had marked his military career, Colonel May married again. On June 17, 1902, in Tazewell, he married Nellie Bly Davidson (1878-1918) of Prestonsburg, a lady forty-nine years his junior. When her husband died in 1903, Nellie returned to Prestonsburg with their only child, Colonel May, who became known locally as "the little colonel." It was Nellie Bly Davidson who built the beautiful mansion on South Arnold Avenue now owned by H. D. Fitzpatrick, Jr. Nellie died during the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918. Colonel May lived in Prestonsburg until his death in 1956. He is buried at the Old Mayo Cemetery at Lancer.

Andrew Jackson May is buried in the Jeffersonville Cemetery in Tazewell, next to his wife Matilda, his son Samuel Davidson May, and his daughter Byrd, who died young. The cemetery is a beautiful one, and the May family monument is large. On Byrd May's marker is this inscription: "God's finger touched her and she slept."

Samuel Survives the Depression of 1819-1825

Why did Samuel wait until 1816 to buy land and establish a farm? First of all, as Steven A. Channing has pointed out, 1816 was "the first year of peace in a generation." Not only had the Napoleonic Wars ended, but the British had been soundly whipped at New Orleans and driven once and for all from American soil. Like 1946 130 years later, 1816 was a year during which the whole nation breathed a sigh of relief. With this relief came renewed optimism. During the war, with European farms in disarray, American farm products had made spectacular gains in European markets. After it, for a year or so, crop prices continued to soar, making creditors hopeful and credit plentiful. Given these trends, it isn't surprising that Samuel became a farmer in 1816.

When he completed his house in 1817, the nation was young and still growing. James Monroe, a Democratic Republican, had just moved into the White House, and Andrew Jackson, the Hero of New Orleans, was down in Spanish Florida fighting the Seminoles. The Monroe Presidency, which historians call "the era of good feeling," lasted from 1817 to 1825. During it Indiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Illinois, Maine, and Missouri joined the Union and Florida became a U. S. territory. It was also the period when Floyd County was being divided into a number of smaller counties. In 1822, for example, the Kentucky General Assembly passed an act creating Lawrence County out of parts of Floyd and Greenup. One of the five commissioners who chose the location of Lawrence County's "permanent seat of justice" was a Prestonsburg man by the name of Samuel May. Furthermore, two years after Samuel participated in the founding of Louisa, his brother Thomas performed a similar service for Pike County. On March 29, 1824, Elijah Adkins donated one acre of land for the Pike County courthouse and associated buildings. Two months later, Thomas May and two other men were appointed commissioners and given the task of choosing "what place the Courthouse shall be built on."

Senator May and the Pound Gap Road (1829-1839)

Like most frontiersmen of his period, Samuel May was a loyal Democrat and a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, the champion of backwoods causes on Capitol Hill. When his wife Catherine bore him his fourth son on January 28, 1829, he named the boy after his hero, who was just beginning his first term as president. In thirty-two years the boy would become Colonel Andrew Jackson May of Ivy Mountain fame. No doubt it was Jackson's success in politics which inspired Samuel to throw his own hat into the ring. In 1832, riding on the coat-tails of Jackson's victory over Henry Clay, Samuel was elected State Representative for Floyd and Pike Counties, and from 1834 to 1839 he served as Floyd County's State Senator.

Jackson's politics were populist, agrarian, and anti-aristocratic. He favored a protective tariff for American farm products, and he opposed the centralization of power represented by the Bank of the United States. Like many Democrats, he believed that the Bank's tight money policy had brought on the depression of 1819-1823. When a bill rechartering the Bank passed Congress in 1832, Jackson promptly vetoed it. Some historians believe that his destruction of the Bank and his policy of distributing government funds among state banks set the stage for the Panic of 1837.

In the 1830s the life of a Kentucky state senator was filled with hardships. Since no wagon roads existed between Prestonsburg and Frankfort, Samuel had to make the trip to the annual session on horseback. Furthermore, since his district contained no auditoriums or high school gymnasiums, his stump speeches were sometimes quite literally speeches made from stumps. Tress Francis, writing in 1956, tells us that old-timers in Whitesburg preserved the tradition that Samuel, during his senatorial race against Nathaniel Collins, delivered one of his speeches from a rock cliff above the banks of the Kentucky River.

New material begins on page (3)

Francis claims that Samuel was an excellent orator, and that his senatorial speeches were "considered fine" by all who heard them. One indication of his popularity with other politicians is the fact that the Governor, on one occasion, gave him a special gift as a reward for his service to Kentucky. After Samuel's death in 1851, this heirloom, a finely-wrought sword-cane, passed from his widow to R. F. Vinson, Colonel Andrew Jackson May, and Andrew Jackson May, Junior. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

During his term in the legislature, Senator Samuel May fought hard to bring "internal improvements" to Floyd County. More specifically, he fought for funds to dredge the Big Sandy and make it navigable for steamboats, and he fought for funds to improve county roads. In the 1830s the county's road system consisted of old wilderness trails passable only by shank's mare or saddle horse. To be a successful farmer, Samuel needed wagon roads, because success in farming depends on your ability to ship large quantities of grain over long distances. To make them fit for wagons, roads had to be surveyed, graded, drained, and corduroyed with logs in places where the ground was marshy. The road project which preoccupied Samuel May during the 1830s was the improvement of the Mount Sterling--Pound Gap Road.

This road, one of Kentucky's wilderness traces, started in Mount Sterling and went through Hazel Green, West Liberty, Licking Station, Paintsville, Prestonsburg, Laynesville, and Pikeville to Pound Gap, the gateway to the rich lands of the Clinch River country. In the early years, by means of this trail, stockgrowers in the Bluegrass region drove their stock to markets in western Virginia and eastern Tennessee. According to Mary Verhoeff, who wrote a Filson Club essay on the subject, "a market was found on the headwaters of the James and Potomac rivers, where the stock brought by the Kentucky drovers was fattened before it was sent farther east." She also says that farmers living along the road exhausted their lands in the effort to furnish these herds with the grain and forage they needed to survive the journey.

William Ely claims that in addition to livestock, the road was used for commercial trade between Washington County, Virginia and Bath County, Kentucky. Wagons of salt from Washington County salt-works were hauled through Pound Gap to supply a demand for the product in Pike, Letcher, Floyd, and Perry Counties. On their return journey, the wagons carried iron from the Bath County iron-works.

Because it crossed his property at Abbott Shoals, Samuel's interest in improving the road was personal as well as political. An engineer's report of the road, written in 1836, shows that it came down Abbott Creek and forded the Big Sandy at the very spot where he operated his ferry:

> Abbott Mountain is in Floyd County and is eighty miles southeast of Mount Sterling. It is 320 feet high on the east side, and over it the road is steeper, rougher, and more difficult to pass than at any other point. The east side is the steepest, and few wagons venture to pass it. The road crosses the Sandy River at a ferry, nearly two miles below Prestonsburg, and above the town again crosses the river, passing across a promotory formed by a great bend in the river of about twelve miles in length.

Efforts to improve the road began in 1817. In that year the Kentucky General Assembly appointed three commissioners to survey the road and estimate the cost of improvements. One of the commissioners was Floyd County Representative Alexander Lackey, a wealthy Virginian who had established a farm at the forks of Beaver Creek. When their work was completed, they strongly recommended that the project be funded and estimated that the cost wouldn't exceed $5,000. However, the assembly rejected the proposal. Because of the state's unwillingness to support the project, local politicians began looking elsewhere for funds. In 1822, for example, they organized the Prestonsburg Highway Company and sought the state's permission to operate a lottery. When this scheme failed, they tried raising subscriptions for the company at $100 a share.

The project didn't really get off the ground until 1833. In their session that year, at the urging of Representative Samuel May, the General Assembly passed "An Act to provide for improving the roads in the counties of Floyd, Pike, and Perry." Seventeen hundred dollars worth of land warrants were appropriated for the purpose, and the Floyd County Court was given the authority to designate roads, appoint superintendents, and "sell the aforesaid warrants for money or labor." In the following year, the Assembly passed an act to improve the road "from Prestonsburg, by the way of Pikeville, to the Virginia line." The bill specified, among other things, that two hundred and fifty dollars worth of land warrants be spent for the improvement of that segment of the road which crossed Abbott Hill in Floyd County, and that Samuel May and John Osborne be appointed commissioners of that part of the project. State Engineer N. B. Buford was ordered to survey the road and estimate the cost of improvements.

In the 1835 session, while Samuel was serving his first term in the Kentucky Senate, he was appointed to the Committee of Internal Improvement, whose stated purpose was "to take under consideration all matters concerning the public highways and navigable streams." On May 1, 1836, Engineer Buford published the results of his survey in a lengthy document titled "Survey of Mountain Roads." Buford recommended that the road be improved, for the following reasons:

> It is greatly used for the driving of stock (hogs, horses, and cattle) to the Virginia and Southern markets, and is about one hundred and forty miles shorter from Lexington in Kentucky to Petersburg in Virginia than the road between the same points which passes the Crab Orchard and Cumberland Gap, and is about forty miles shorter than the road by the mouth of the Sandy. The population on the road is sparse, but more than sufficient to afford every accommodation that might be required for the stock-drovers.

Reading this, we begin to understand why Samuel's interest in the road was so strong. An improved Pound Gap Road would not only have increased his ferry traffic, but would have provided a local market for his corn, oats, and hay. He was dreaming of the day when his farm would be a feeding station on the road and his house would be a prosperous wayside inn.

On January 14, 1837, Senator Samuel May introduced a bill "to improve the road from Mount Sterling, by way of Prestonsburg, to the Virginia line." A month later the bill was passed and signed into law by Governor James Clark. To fund the project, the Assembly appropriated $25,000. According to Verhoeff, the amount actually spent was $23,243.40. The work was performed by local contractors, including Samuel's brother Thomas, who was paid $3,000 to improve a seven-mile stretch of the road from Pikeville to "the top of Island Hill." The greater part of the work consisted of "grading and draining the worst hills, and bridging some of the worst water-courses." Six bridges were built over the Big Sandy between Pikeville and Prestonsburg.

Dear Robert - I've made some major revisions in the first section, regarding the Fiddler Thomas May question. Correspondence with Fred T. May has helped me to see the light

Robert Perry

The Oldest House in the Valley

by Robert Perry

The May House in North Prestonsburg, built by Samuel May in 1817, is the oldest brick home in the Big Sandy Valley. A century ago it was the hub of a three-hundred-acre farm, and, from its little knoll, commanded a view of green meadows, herds of cattle, and fields of corn and wheat. Today it overlooks a shopping mall and the green campus of Prestonsburg Community College. In her essay about the house, the late Josephine Fields called it Floyd County's Old Kentucky Home, pointing out that its style of architecture, Federal or Georgian, is the same as Sportsman's Hill, the William Whitley house in Lincoln County, and Federal Hill, the John Rowan house in Bardstown, which, by the way, it antedates by one year. Indeed, the May House is older than many well-known Kentucky landmarks.

Samuel May (1783-1851) was one of the pioneer builders of Floyd County. By turns a carpenter, surveyor, contractor, ferryman, innkeeper, farmer, justice of the peace, gold prospector, and politician, he built the county's first permanent courthouse, established one of its first saw and grist mills, and, from 1832 to 1839, represented the county in the state legislature. He also was the first Floyd Countian to sign a contract involving the development of coal. In 1842, having overextended himself, he sold his house and farm to his brother Thomas May (1787-1867), one of the founders of Pike County. Since Thomas's day, except for a brief period, the house has remained in the hands of his descendants, including William James May (1819-1883), Johnny Powers May (1872-1959), and Elijah Brown May (1896-1958). Today it is owned by the latter man's two sons, William H. May and E. B. May, Jr. In addition to these men, other prominent Floyd Countians have lived under its roof, including Colonel Andrew Jackson May (1829-1903), one of the region's Confederate leaders during the Civil War; Beverly Clark May (1856-1929), County Judge from 1913 to 1917; and Leonidas Polk May (1865-1951), County Sheriff from 1910 to 1914.

Samuel May wasn't the only man with the May surname to settle in Floyd County, and as a consequence, the May family has many local branches. Newcomers should be careful not to confuse the above-mentioned Colonel Andrew Jackson May with Representative Andrew Jackson May (1875-1959), this region's Congressman during the Roosevelt years. One of Kentucky's most distinguished leaders, A. J. May was the grandson of Samuel May's brother Reuben May (1800-1840), the first settler on Beaver Creek and the progenitor of the Maytown Mays. Furthermore, the branch of the family headed Caleb May (1781-1827), an early settler of Magoffin County, is separate from Samuel's and Reuben's branch, and should not be confused with it.

Because of its unique status as the county's first two-story brick residence, and because of the prominence of the Samuel May family in early Prestonsburg, the May House was the center of Floyd County social life during the early years. Local beaux and belles danced the Virginia reel in its ballroom, local gentry savored roast beef in its dining room, thoroughbreds raced before cheering crowds in its meadows, and politicians delivered stump speeches from its porch. Today, for the historian, the house provides a locus, a starting point from which he can survey the local past, chart its principal features, and lay out roads of access to it. In the past year I have been researching the history of the house, and in the remainder of this essay, I will share what I have found.

The Mays of Shelby Creek (1800-1813)

Samuel May was the second oldest son of John and Sarah Phillips May, one of the pioneer families of Eastern Kentucky. Originally from Martinsburg, Berkeley County, Virginia, where they were married in 1780, John and Sarah tried their luck in East Tennessee before coming to this area. In the spring of 1800 they sold their farm on Roane's Creek in Carter County and made a long and difficult journey through Pound Gap to Shelby Creek in present-day Pike County, bring with them their six children, their livestock, and wagons filled with all their worldly possessions. In those days Shelby Creek was covered by old-growth poplar, oak, and other hardwoods, and when they arrived, they faced the daunting task of carving a farm out of the wilderness. Samuel spent his early manhood on this farm before coming to Prestonsburg in 1803.

Two May family genealogists, Fred T. May and Tress May Francis, have discovered many facts about John May. In 1776, for example, he was living in the home of his uncle, Daniel May, located at the corner of Queen and Burke Streets in Martinsburg. In those days the town was a station on the Warriors Path, the road which connected western Virginia with Cumberland Gap, Pound Gap, and the Kentucky settlements. In October, 1776, the Virginia Assembly passed a bill providing funds for the raising of six battalions of infantry. Berkeley County was required to raise eighty-four men. One of those who volunteered for duty was John May, age seventeen. In December, 1776, John's regiment marched to New Jersey, where they witnessed the Battle of Long Island from the Jersey shore. They also watched General Washington and his men make their retreat across the Hudson.

In the spring of 1779, John returned to Martinsburg and began his courtship of Sarah Phillips. They were married in March, 1780, after "publishing the banns" in a local church. In 1845, thirty-two years after John's death, Sarah applied for a widow's pension, and as part of her application, she gave a deposition detailing the facts of John's military career. Among other things, she recalled that golden day in April, 1779, when she had first laid eyes on her future husband. Out on an errand, she had seen two local boys, Jacob Orr and Jacob Pink, take John into Kinney's Tavern and treat him to a drink. When she asked another boy why they were celebrating, he told her that John had just returned from the Army. Sarah died in 1846 and is buried beside her husband in the William Keathley Graveyard on Shelby Creek. The graves are located in a grove of trees and marked by native headstones. One of the stones has the faintly legible inscription, "John May born..." Her inscription has disappeared.

John May's service in the Continental Line makes him typical of the Virginians who came to Kentucky following the Revolution. As most readers know, Kentucky was part of the Commonwealth of Virginia from 1776 to 1792. Kentucky historian George Morgan Chinn has reminded us that Virginia, during the Revolution, financed her war effort by issuing her soldiers treasury warrants good for a specified number of acres on her western frontier. The number of acres granted varied according to rank, and warrant holders were allowed to locate their claims on vacant land anywhere in the territory. Those not wishing to settle in Kentucky sold their warrants to speculators at greatly reduced prices. As a result of this policy, thousands of veterans, speculators and surveyors came to Kentucky after the war, the former to claim their lands, establish farms, and raise families, and the latter to make a fast buck.

Although researchers have uncovered a wealth of information about John May, they haven't yet answered an important question. Was he the first of his family to settle on Shelby Creek? Unfortunately, there are two good reasons why this question may never be resolved. The first is the fact that Kentucky's first two Federal Census Schedules, the 1790 Census and the 1800 Census, were destroyed by fire when the British burned Washington in 1812. The second is the fact that Floyd County's early land records were destroyed when the courthouse burned in 1808. (Fire seems to be the bane of Floyd County historians.) The problem is further complicated by the fact that the findings of May family genealogists, who rely on documentary evidence, fail to support the conclusions of local historians, who often get by with mere word-of-mouth. In other words, on the question I have just posed, the genealogists say one thing and the local historians say another.

A good example of the latter is Catlettsburg historian William Ely, who interviewed Pike County old-timers in the 1880s. He concluded that "amongst the first" of the Mays to settle on Shelby Creek was a man named Thomas May, and that members of this man's family were living on the creek as early as 1796. Furthermore, says Ely, Thomas May was "a very jovial man, fond of fiddling and dancing, and popular with his neighbors." Then comes the shocker: "He owned more slaves than any man on Sandy, either in his day or since, footing up in number seventy-one." Ely says nothing whatsoever about John May, however, and he frankly admits that he has "failed to gather any material on which to base a consecutive history of the doings of the May family."

Genealogists know with certainty that Samuel May had a brother, Thomas May (1787-1867), the previously-mentioned buyer of Samuel's farm in 1842. According to Fred T. May, when John May died in 1813, Thomas took possession of his father's farm on Shelby Creek. One of the founders of Pike County, this man's life is well documented. In 1822, for example, he was one of six sureties for the bond of Spencer Adkins, the first clerk of Pike County. Was this Thomas Ely's Fiddler Thomas? There is no evidence in census records showing that John May or any of his sons owned large numbers of slaves. John May owned no slaves in 1810, nor did Samuel. In 1820 Samuel owned two slaves. Thomas owned one slave in 1830, four in 1840, and none in 1850.

Another example of the oral history approach to the problem is an article, "First Settlers on Robinson Creek," published by Mrs. Jessie Horne's Third Grade Class, Robinson Creek Elementary. In 1972 Horne's students interviewed a number of modern-day old-timers on Shelby Creek as part of their history project. Horne's subjects told their interviewers that "the first settlers on Robinson Creek were Mays." They also claimed that the father of the clan, Thomas May, "had a patent on all the land from Shelby to the forks of Robinson Creek." Like Ely's a century earlier, Horne's subjects preserved the tradition that the Mays had "owned a lot of slaves." They also maintained that "slavery was not practiced in Eastern Kentucky very much," and that Thomas May's large slave holding was the exception rather than the rule.

May genealogist Fred T. May takes issue with both of these accounts. Ely's account is suspect, he argues, because Ely's "admission of the limited material available for an accurate report of the May family casts doubt on any research he did on the subject." May also points out that by the 1880s, "there was a very large population of Mays available to provide family history, and steamboat traffic was regular from Ely's hometown of Catlettsburg to Floyd and Pike County." As for the findings of Mrs. Jessie Horne's Third Grade Class, they are also of dubious value, because of "the lack of any substantiated documentation of the stories" by Horne's subjects.

Notwithstanding my own unionist sympathies, I must admit that Fred's argument is a convincing one. Ely's Fiddler Thomas May is probably Thomas May (1787-1867) distorted by a piece of unionist gossip. When I searched the record books for evidence of Fiddler's existence, I came up empty-handed.

again, keep yourself out of this." (doubtful! Dont make this an issue.

Samuel May in Early Prestonsburg (1803-1821)

When Samuel reached maturity, he left his father's Shelby Creek farm and moved to Prestonsburg, which in 1803 consisted of John Spurlock's cabin, Solomon DeRosset's fur-trading post, and several other dwellings. Although county records from this period no longer exist, the level of civilization attained by Prestonsburg in 1803 may be estimated with the help of the following receipt, published by a local merchant at the February 1807 session of the Floyd County Court:

> Received of R. W. Evans, a buffalo at $45.00 and it is to be good against a note I have of his for 535 bear skins, dated 1802. Signed: Jo. Thompson.

In the period between 1800 and 1815, according to Carol Crowe-Carraco, the Frenchman Solomon DeRosset did a brisk business exporting bearskins to France, where they were manufactured into hats for Napoleon's Grenadier Guards. When the trade ceased following the emperor's defeat at Waterloo, DeRosset surrendered his French citizenship and sought other employment. He later became a Floyd County justice of the peace. In any case, hunting and trapping were important to the county's economy in the early years. Early Pikeville merchant John Dils, Jr., arriving in the Big Sandy in 1836, found the region to be a hunter's paradise. "Bear and deer were abundant," he recalled, "and hunters were numerous and happy." Because animal pelts found a ready sale, "many a fat bear and deer's carcass, after being stripped of its hide, was left to be devoured by ravenous wolves."

When Samuel arrived in Prestonsburg in 1803, he probably lodged and dined at a local tavern during the period when he was buying his lot and building his cabin. Because tavern rates were determined by the County Court and entered in its records, we know with a fair degree of accuracy what he paid for his lodging and meals. In 1808, for example, Floyd County tavern rates were as follows:

Good warm breakfast	21¢
Good warm dinner	25¢
Good warm supper	21¢
Lodging, one night with clean sheets	08¢
Good stablage, 12 hours, with rough feed	12¢

What kind of cabin did Samuel build? If it was like other cabins built in Prestonsburg during the same period, it was constructed of giant poplar logs hewn square and laid in a saddle notch. A newspaper clipping saved by Josephine Fields shows that some years ago, when the William James Mayo House on Front Street was razed, Mayo's original log cabin, constructed in the manner described above, was found under weatherboarding that had been added by a later owner. The Mayo cabin contained two rooms and a fireplace made of hand-dressed rocks.

During his early years in Prestonsburg, Samuel probably supported himself by hunting and trapping. As the town grew, however, he found work as a carpenter. In 1808, for example, Floyd County contracted with him to build its first stocks, pillory, whipping post, and stray pen. Stocks and pillories were heavy wooden frames, within which criminals were locked and exposed to public ridicule. Whipping posts were all that the name implies. Court records for May 22nd, 1809, contain this entry:

> John Brown and William J. Mayo, commissioners, report that they found the Stray Pen at the Courthouse unacceptable. The Stocks, the Pillory, and the Whipping Post accepted as of May 15th, 1809. Wm. J. Mayo given the Key to the Stray Pen.

In subsequent years Samuel's whipping post was put to good use. In October, 1816, for example, "Nathan, a black man slave," was brought before the Floyd County Court and charged with stealing a "crock" worth fourteen cents. When the jury handed down a verdict of guilty, the judge imposed the following sentence:

> It is ordered by the court that Robert Walker, deputy sheriff, take the prisoner from the bar and convey him to the public whipping post and there on his bare back lay on fifteen stripes well laid on.

In his History of Martinsburg and Berkeley County, published in 1888, F. Vernon Aler describes that town's public square as it was in the slavery period. Recalling the whipping post, he says:

> I can well remember its dark and menacing outline when I was a boy. It stood directly opposite the Court House door--about thirty feet from the present curbstone, and more than once have I witnessed the writhings and contortions of human flesh, both of whites and blacks, under the lash of the jailer, as I passed to and from old James Anderson's school house.

By 1808 Samuel must have been making a good living, because in that year he married Catherine Evans, who, along with other members of her family, had emigrated to Prestonsburg from Morgantown, Virginia. Catherine's brother, Thomas Evans, was a contractor, and in 1806 Floyd County awarded him the contract to build the county's first courthouse. Deed Book A of the Floyd County Records shows that on August 22, 1808, the commissioners inspected the still unfinished building and found fault with it, noting, among other things, that the wall separating the jury room from the main court room was "being done with old plank full of nail holes." When this building was accidentally destroyed by fire several months later, Evans was awarded a new contract and his securities were released from their original contract of 1806.

Because of his close connection to the Evans family, Samuel May was probably involved in these projects. When the Floyd County Court commissioned a third courthouse in 1818, Samuel was awarded the contract to build it. The Court directed him to construct the building of "brick manufactured at or near the scene." The contract also specified that the building be thirty feet square and have two stories, with seven windows on the lower floor and four windows on the upper floor. Green Venetian shutters were to be hung outside the windows and the roof was to be painted red. This third courthouse was completed in 1821 and served the county for almost seventy years.

Like most frontiersmen, Samuel May was a jack-of-all-trades, because frontier life required that a man be versatile. To use the modern parlance, he was required to wear many hats. Moreover, in a county filled with versatile men, Samuel was exceptionally so. Early court records show that in the period from 1811 to 1821 he engaged in a wide variety of pursuits. In 1812, while serving as one of Prestonsburg's two justices of the peace, he helped John Evans and Nathan Herrell survey a road from Abbott Shoal to Little Paint. In 1813 he was "granted permission to keep a tavern at his home in Prestonsburg." In May, 1814, he was granted a license to keep a ferry across the Big Sandy "at his house," and to charge 12½ cents per man and horse. In 1816, in his capacity as joiner (expert carpenter) he took Jacob Waller as his apprentice and agreed to train him for the trade. In 1818 he helped survey a road from "Widow Crisps old place" to "Solomon Osburns old place." By that year, in addition to everything else, he was operating a saw and grist mill at the mouth of Abbott Creek. But wait--let's not forget that from 1818 to 1821, he was supervising the construction of the Floyd County courthouse. And these are just his documented activities. To put it mildly, Samuel May was a real go-getter.

How did Samuel, who had grown up on the Tennessee frontier, acquire the technical knowledge to build a watermill? His lack of formal education notwithstanding, it's a mistake to assume that he was an ignorant, untutored backwoodsman. After all, John May had grown up in Martinsburg, which means that he not only attended primary school, but that he rubbed shoulders with the kind of men for whom mill-building and road-surveying were routine matters. Moreover, as Carolyn Traum has pointed out, young men coming of age on the frontier were educated by means of skill-swapping. For example, if you were a surveyor and had a son who wanted to learn the miller's trade, you found a miller who had a son who wanted to learn surveying. After the bargain was struck, the two sons were exchanged for a period of six months to a year, and instructed in their respective trades. It was probably by means of this frontier institution that Samuel acquired his many skills.

Samuel probably purchased his mill hardware--the bushings, bolts, gears, sawblades, grindstones and other devices--from an outfitter in Catlettsburg, for by 1818 there was a substantial flatboat trade between Prestonsburg and that town. By then, according to Carol Crowe-Carraco, large shipments of beaverskins, bearskins, corn, livestock and tobacco were moving downstream and manufactured goods were moving upstream. We don't know the exact location of the mill, but we do know that it was still standing in 1841. In that year, according to Henry Scalf, the mill was sold to Richard Oeering. Moreover, the contract stipulated that "if the present mill should be destroyed by fire or accident . . . the mills are to be rebuilt in a reasonable time."

In 1808, following the death of Thomas Evans, Catherine May inherited her share of his estate. When John May died in 1813, Samuel inherited his part of John's estate. As Fred T. May has pointed out, the two inheritances made the young couple relatively well-to-do by Prestonsburg standards. Samuel used this money to buy land. County records show that in 1816, he purchased over 3,000 acres, for which he paid about $3,400. From John Graham, the Laird of Graham's Bottom, he purchased 120 acres immediately north of Prestonsburg, including a large expanse of bottom land known as Abbott Shoal. When he bought it, the property was covered by a dense forest of sycamore, maple, beech, poplar, walnut, ash and oak. In order to make it suitable for grain crops, it had to be cleared, stump by stump. Although no accounts have been handed down telling how this work was accomplished, it was probably done by hired hands.

In "Ballad For a Forty-Niner," her poem about Samuel May, Gertrude May Lutz asserts that the May farm was cleared by slave labor:

> He left the land that his slaves had cleared--
> Land of the aborigines.....
> At the edge of the wood with the giant trees
> That fell to the saw as his kinfolk cheered.

However, no evidence exists showing that Samuel owned slaves who were capable of such strenuous work. To be sure, Deed Book A does contain an entry showing that he purchased three slaves from Samuel Osborn in October, 1816. The difficulty lies in the fact that they weren't field hands. On the contrary, one was a twenty-eight-year-old woman, one was a thirteen-year-old girl, and one was an eleven-year-old boy. Their names were Phillis, Betsy and Ben, and the latter were the former's children. Surely these individuals weren't put to work felling huge trees and digging out stumps. The more reasonable assumption is that Phillis became the family cook and Betsy and Ben were put to work peeling potatoes and hoeing beans.

Building the May House (1816-1817)

In 1816 Samuel May began building the house which is the subject of this essay. According to Tress May Francis, the brick used in its construction was manufactured at the site, or, as she puts it, "burned on the farm." The lime for the cement was made by pulverizing mussel shells collected from the Big Sandy, which in those days was home to numerous species of fresh-water clams. According to Josephine Fields, the lumber for the house was whip-sawed from logs hauled to the site, and then cured and hand-planed to meet the builder's specifications. Indeed, the construction of the house must have been a laborious and time-consuming process.

Josephine Fields, who published an article about the house in 1952, noted that "the remains of the kilns can be discovered even today after a lapse of 135 years." She continues:

> We do not know the names of the old artisans who made the bricks under the supervision of Samuel May. Perhaps it is, as local tradition in the May family has it, that slaves did the work at the kilns. Only mute evidence of clay dust remains and we do not know.

The design of the house provides much evidence of Samuel May's skill as a builder and architect. Tress May Francis, writing in 1956, pointed out that the brick in the front wall of the house is laid in a Flemish bond, an extremely strong pattern of construction. (Incidentally, Indian fighter William Whitley used this pattern when he constructed the walls of Sportsman's Hill in 1787.) All the walls of the house, including the interior partitions, are four bricks thick, necessitating unusually deep window sills and door frames. In other words, there are structural reasons why the house has survived as long as it has. Francis continues:

> In the large entrance hall the original stairway, bannister, spokes and steps are still in use and have the same original wood. The woodwork is poplar, hand-carved and now painted white, but was originally a grained oak color. The floors are of poplar and white ash, and both floors and woodwork were put together with wooden pegs and nails, the latter having been ordered from Abingdon, Virginia.

The front doorway of the house is distinctive. Instead of the standard fantail transom of most Federal doorways, it is accentuated by oblong rectangular sidelights. (Incidentally, rectangular sidelights can also be found on the O. P. Ely House in Knox County, a Federal home of the same size and exterior design as the May House.) The door itself is four feet wide and has six hand-carved panels. The original brass lock is still in place, and it still works. Reproductions of this kind of lock may be obtained from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation at a cost of $725. Keys are sold separately and cost $46.

Tress Francis isn't the only writer to praise the craftsmanship of the house. Gordon Moore, writing in 1961, marveled at its hand-carved mantels and spacious rooms. The porch presented him with a problem, however, because its size and placement aren't in keeping with the Federal style. Certainly it is true that large plain porches weren't characteristic of Federal style homes. On the other hand, small plain porches were sometimes attached to Federal-style taverns, as Colbyville Tavern in Clark County illustrates. However, I agree with Moore that the present porch isn't original, and William May tells me that family tradition corroborates this judgement. The original porch was probably smaller, and, considering the existence of the second-story door, it was probably a two-story affair.

One of the riddles still to be solved is the purpose of the second-story door which opens onto the porch roof. In the early days it probably provided access to a balcony protected by hand-rails. Given Samuel May's political proclivities, one can easily imagine what purpose such a balcony would have served during Democratic Party rallies and Fourth of July celebrations. In American towns of the post Civil War era, saloons and hotels often had balconies, as we all know from watching too many Hollywood westerns. At any rate, in the days before public address systems, balconies were handy things when you needed to address a crowd.

Although the May House has only six rooms, they are large ones, and several of them measure eighteen by twenty feet. The more I study the house, the more I see that it was designed to be not just a private home, but a community hall. Its porch and balcony were intended to add pomp and dignity to political occasions. Its large rooms were fashioned not just to accomodate weddings, funerals, prayer meetings, cornhuskings, and the like, but to provide shelter during storms and Indian attacks. In 1816, although the immediate danger had passed, memories of Indian atrocities were still fresh. Less than three decades had elapsed since the Shawnees had raided western Virginia and butchered Jenny Wiley's children on Walker's Creek. Furthermore, the tribe had hunted in the region as late as 1793. Samuel May was keenly aware of the needs of his community, and the design of his house reflects this fact.

It is very likely that the windows of the house originally had shutters. J. Winston Coleman's Historic Kentucky, a collection of photographs of early Kentucky homes, demonstrates that shutters were typical of the Federal style. Wickland, Wakefield, Locust Grove, and Desha Glen all have shutters, and so does the O. P. Ely home in Knox County, a Federal home of the same size and outward design as the May House. Another argument for the case is the fact that the courthouse Samuel built during the 1818-1821 period was protected by "green Venetian shutters." Furthermore, since glass was a precious commodity on the frontier, Samuel would have wanted to protect his windows from hail and strong winds.

What outbuildings did the May Farm have? If it was like other Kentucky farms of the antebellum period, it included a free-standing kitchen connected to the house by a walkway, a barn, a smokehouse, a carriage house, a corn crib, a well, a privy, and the slave quarters. E. B. May, Jr., who spent part of his childhood on the farm, recalls that his father's smokehouse was located immediately south of the back portion of the house, and that a one-story barn was situated on land now occupied by his present home. The barn contained a fattening pen for hogs and was adjoined by a hog lot. An orchard was located on land now occupied by Pizza Hut and Wendy's Restaurant.

What kind of crops did Samuel raise? Early Kentucky historian Lewis Collins, whose Historical Sketches of Kentucky (1847) includes descriptions of individual counties, says this about Floyd County agriculture during the 1840s:

> The principal crop is corn, though wheat, oats and flax are also cultivated. The mountains afford excellent range for sheep, hogs and cattle. Three thousand hogs are annually driven to market from this county, and wool is beginning to be an article of exportation.

According to E. B. May, Jr., the farm annually produced 250 bushels of corn during the period when it was owned by his father. He also recalls the tradition that his great grandmother, Cynthia Powers May, owned a spinning wheel, and that during his father's childhood it was stored in the May House attic along with other family relics. When tenants occupied the house during the period from 1912 to 1933, they chopped these relics up and used them for firewood.

Samuel Survives the Depression of 1819-1825

Why did Samuel wait until 1816 to buy land and establish a farm? First of all, as Steven A. Channing has pointed out, 1816 was "the first year of peace in a generation." Not only had the Napoleonic Wars ended, but the British had been soundly whipped at New Orleans and driven once and for all from American soil. Like 1946 130 years later, 1816 was a year during which the whole nation breathed a sigh of relief. With this relief came renewed optimism. Ouring the war, with European farms in disarray, American farm products had made spectacular gains in European markets. After it, for a year or so, crop prices continued to soar, making creditors hopeful and credit plentiful. Given these trends, it isn't surprising that Samuel became a farmer in 1816.

When he completed his house in 1817, the nation was young and still growing. James Monroe, a Democratic Republican, had just moved into the White House, and Andrew Jackson, the Hero of New Orleans, was down in Spanish Florida fighting the Seminoles. The Monroe Presidency, which historians call "the era of good feeling," lasted from 1817 to 1825. During it Indiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Illinois, Maine, and Missouri joined the Union and Florida became a U. S. territory. It was also the period when Henry Clay was masterminding the Missouri Compromise, John Marshall was laying the foundations of U. S. Constitutional law, and Monroe himself was warning Europeans not to meddle in Western Hemisphere affairs.

It was also a period of rapid technological change. After Fulton's successful demonstration of the Clermont in 1807, the pole-driven keelboats that had hauled freight on American rivers were quickly replaced by steamboats. St. Louis cheered its first steamboat in 1818, Lafayette rode one up the Ohio in 1825, and the newfangled contraption reached the Big Sandy in 1837. Steamboats were followed by steam locomotives. The first American railroad, the Baltimore and Ohio, was chartered in 1827. Kentucky's first railroad, a line connecting Lexington and Frankfort, was completed in 1835, but the Chesapeake and Ohio didn't reach Prestonsburg until 1904.

Viewed from a distance, the Monroe Era looks like the golden age of American democracy. Viewed up close, however, the picture reveals some ugly details. For Kentucky farmers the period was less an era of good feelings than one of panic, anxiety, and despair. Steven A. Channing has told this story in his bicentenial history of the state, and in the following paragraphs I will summarize what he says.

Since colonial days America's frontier settlements had suffered from a lack of hard cash. When Jefferson's Democratic Republicans came to power in 1801, they tried to solve this problem by passing laws designed to stimulate the growth of the banking industry. By 1815 hundreds of new state and local banks had been incorporated. Underfunded and overpromoted, lacking the legal safeguards we nowadays take for granted, these banks printed their own currency and issued it without sufficient specie support. Furthermore, the wave of optimism that swept America in 1816 caused a rapid expansion of the banking industry. In 1818, according to Channing, forty new banks were chartered in Kentucky, and six more were added the following year.

From 1815 to 1818 the bubble expanded, fed by underfunded currencies, irresponsible loan policies, and rampant speculation. Then, in the autumn of 1818, word came from England that cotton prices were falling. By 1819 the commodity had lost two-thirds of its value. Soon the prices of other products--wheat, flax, hemp, and slaves--began falling too, as European farms that had lain idle during the war resumed production. For all concerned, it was a stern lesson in the dynamics of supply and demand. When land prices began to fall, depositors rushed to their banks and removed their deposits. During the Panic of 1819, America experienced one of the sharpest economic declines ever recorded.

The nation's central bank, the Bank of the United States, reacted to the crisis by calling for the immediate repayment of loans in hard currency, i. e., gold and silver coins. Well-established Kentucky banks followed suit. When this happened, the state's forty newly-established banks went bankrupt and thousands of Kentucky farmers lost their farms. "Thousands were dispossessed," says Channing, "as mortgages were foreclosed." When the army of debtors descended on Frankfort, the legislature responded in good Democratic fashion by passing a series of relief measures. One required banks to accept delayed payments on mortgages, and another authorized counties to aid their poor by giving them state land.

In May, 1821, for example, citing "An Act for the Benefit of Poor Widows," the Floyd County Court came to the assistance of eleven impoverished women by giving them land warrants good for one hundred acres. To obtain her warrant, each widow had to prove that her net worth was less than one hundred dollars. Did these women subsequently stake claims and erect homesteads? Probably not. More likely they sold their warrants to speculators for hard cash and then bought groceries to feed their children. One suspects, too, that with food on their tables and money jingling in their pockets, their dead husbands rose from their graves and rejoined their families.

Samuel May weathered the depression in fine style, not only because he had paid hard cash for his farm and owned it clear, but because he had income from other sources. No doubt his ferry provided income during this period, because even during bad times people must get across rivers. One way Samuel kept afloat was by selling property. In October, 1819, for example, he sold 150 acres on Blain Creek to Miles Terry for $110. In April, 1821, he sold Ben, the slave boy he had purchased from Samuel Osborn in 1816, to "Maurice Langhorn and Son." Ben must have been a good worker, because he fetched a price of $625.

A High-Spirited, Fun-Loving Group (1809-1833)

If frequent pregnancies are a sign of marital bliss, the period from 1809 to 1833 must have been a happy one for Samuel and his wife Catherine. Genealogical records show that during those years she bore him six sons and eight daughters. Like most frontier couples, they took seriously the biblical injunction to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." Furthermore, in a world without combustion engines or electric appliances, large families were an economic necessity. Samuel needed sons to help him operate his farm, ferry, grist mill, saw mill, lumber yard, and other concerns, and Catherine needed daughters to help her cook, wash, clean, mend, spin, weave, and a hundred other household chores. If we go by the dates provided by Tress Francis, we can calculate that nine of the May children were born on the May House premises. Here are their names and dates of birth:

1. Thomas, born March 11, 1809
2. John, born April 13, 1810
3. Elizabeth, born October 20, 1811
4. Catherine, born September 11, 1813
5. Samuel, born June 1, 1816
6. Sarah Minerva, born March 20, 1818
7. Mahala Jane, born November 11, 1819
8. Louvina, born January 19, 1822
9. Amanda F., born October 22, 1824
10. Charlotte T., born October 22, 1824
11. Lucretia C., born January 18, 1827
12. Andrew Jackson, born January 28, 1829
13. George Washington, born about 1831
14. Daniel Wesley, born October 22, 1833

Francis preserves the tradition that the Mays were a high-spirited, fun-loving group, and that many a candle-lit party was held in the upstairs ballroom before the second owner of the house converted it into a bedroom. She also says that Catherine was very proud of her children, especially her daughters, and that when the eight of them would set out for church on Sunday "dressed in their finery," they were a sight to behold. Indeed, this love of luxury may have contributed to the financial reverses which caused Samuel to lose the property in 1842.

Francis's records show that when the May children reached maturity, they scattered to the four winds. No one knows what happened to Thomas. All we know about John is that he "went to Oregon." Elizabeth married Ephriam Hill and moved to New Market, Missouri. Catherine married Elias Kenard and moved to Bazaar, Kansas. Samuel "lived and died in Indian Territory." Sarah Minerva married James H. Layne and moved to Wisconsin. Mahala Jane married Dr. Perez S. Randall, who later became a surgeon in the Confederate Army, and after the war they settled in Maysville. Louvina married Jacob McDonald and moved to Eaton, Indiana. Amanda married John M. Burnett, a local tailor, and stayed in Prestonsburg. Andrew Jackson became a Confederate Colonel and later a successful lawyer in Tazewell, Virginia. No one knows what happened to George Washington. Daniel Wesley became a lawyer and moved to Hazard, where he married Martha Brashears in 1858.

Senator May and the Pound Gap Road (1829-1839)

Like most frontiersmen of his period, Samuel May was a loyal Democrat and a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson, the champion of backwoods causes on Capitol Hill. When his wife Catherine bore him his fourth son on January 28, 1829, he named the boy after his hero, who was just beginning his first term as president. In thirty-two years the boy would become Colonel Andrew Jackson May of Ivy Mountain fame. No doubt it was Jackson's success in politics which inspired Samuel to throw his own hat into the ring. In 1832, riding on the coat-tails of Jackson's victory over Henry Clay, Samuel was elected State Representative for Floyd and Pike Counties, and from 1834 to 1839 he served as Floyd County's State Senator.

Jackson's politics were populist, agrarian, and anti-aristocratic. He favored a protective tariff for American farm products, and he opposed the centralization of power represented by the Bank of the United States. Like many Democrats, he believed that the Bank's tight money policy had brought on the depression of 1819-1823. When a bill rechartering the Bank passed Congress in 1832, Jackson promptly vetoed it. Some historians believe that his destruction of the Bank and his policy of distributing government funds among state banks set the stage for the Panic of 1837.

In the 1830s the life of a Kentucky state senator was filled with hardships. Since no wagon roads existed between Prestonsburg and Frankfort, Samuel had to make the trip to the annual session on horseback. Furthermore, since his district contained no auditoriums or high school gymnasiums, his stump speeches were sometimes quite literally speeches made from stumps. Tress Francis, writing in 1956, tells us that old-timers in Whitesburg preserved the tradition that Samuel, during his senatorial race against Nathaniel Collins, delivered one of his speeches from a rock cliff above the banks of the Kentucky River.

Francis claims that Samuel was an excellent orator, and that his senatorial speeches were "considered fine" by all who heard them. One indication of his popularity with other politicians is the fact that the Governor, on one occasion, gave him a special gift as a reward for his service to Kentucky. After Samuel's death in 1851, this heirloom, a finely-wrought sword-cane, passed from his widow to R. F. Vinson, Colonel Andrew Jackson May, and Andrew Jackson May, Junior. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

During his term in the legislature, Senator Samuel May fought hard to bring "internal improvements" to Floyd County. More specifically, he fought for funds to dredge the Big Sandy and make it navigable for steamboats, and he fought for funds to improve county roads. In the 1830s the county's road system consisted of old wilderness trails passable only by shank's mare or saddle horse. To be a successful farmer, Samuel needed wagon roads, because success in farming depends on your ability to ship large quantities of grain over long distances. To make them fit for wagons, roads had to be surveyed, graded, drained, and corduroyed with logs in places where the ground was marshy. The road project which preoccupied Samuel May during the 1830s was the improvement of the Mount Sterling--Pound Gap Road.

This road, one of Kentucky's wilderness traces, started in Mount Sterling and went through Hazel Green, West Liberty, Licking Station, Paintsville, Prestonsburg, Laynesville, and Pikeville to Pound Gap, the gateway to the rich lands of the Clinch River country. In the early years, by means of this trail, stockgrowers in the Bluegrass region drove their stock to markets in western Virginia and eastern Tennessee. According to Mary Verhoeff, who wrote a Filson Club essay on the subject, "a market was found on the headwaters of the James and Potomac rivers, where the stock brought by the Kentucky drovers was fattened before it was sent farther east." She also says that farmers living along the road exhausted their lands in the effort to furnish these herds with the grain and forage they needed to survive the journey.

William Ely claims that in addition to livestock, the road was used for commercial trade between Washington County, Virginia and Bath County, Kentucky. Wagons of salt from Washington County salt-works were hauled through Pound Gap to supply a demand for the product in Pike, Letcher, Floyd, and Perry Counties. On their return journey, the wagons carried iron from the Bath County iron-works.

Because it crossed his property at Abbott Shoals, Samuel's interest in improving the road was personal as well as political. An engineer's report of the road, written in 1836, shows that it came down Abbott Creek and forded the Big Sandy at the very spot where he operated his ferry:

> Abbott Mountain is in Floyd County and is eighty miles southeast of Mount Sterling. It is 320 feet high on the east side, and over it the road is steeper, rougher, and more difficult to pass than at any other point. The east side is the steepest, and few wagons venture to pass it. The road crosses the Sandy River at a ferry, nearly two miles below Prestonsburg, and above the town again crosses the river, passing across a promotory formed by a great bend in the river of about twelve miles in length.

According to Verhoeff, efforts to improve the road began in 1817. In that year the Kentucky Legislature put three commissioners to work surveying the road and estimating the cost of improvements. When their work was completed, they strongly recommended that the project be funded and estimated that the cost wouldn't exceed $5,000. However, the legislature rejected the proposal. Because of the state's unwillingness to support the project, local politicians began looking elsewhere for funds. In 1822, for example, they organized the Prestonsburg Highway Company and sought the state's permission to operate a lottery. When this scheme failed, they tried raising subscriptions for the company at $100 a share.

The project didn't really get off the ground until 1836. In that year, due to the efforts of State Senator Samuel May, Kentucky's newly-established Board of Internal Improvement undertook a second survey of the road and persuaded the legislature that it was worth improving. Their report reads:

> It is greatly used for the driving of stock (hogs, horses, and cattle) to the Virginia and Southern markets, and is about one hundred and forty miles shorter from Lexington in Kentucky to Petersburg in Virginia than the road between the same points which passes the Crab Orchard and Cumberland Gap, and is about forty miles shorter than the road by the mouth of the Sandy. The population on the road is sparse, but more than sufficient to afford every accommodation that might be required for the stock-drovers.

Reading this, we begin to understand why Samuel's interest in the road was so strong. An improved Pound Gap Road would not only have increased his ferry traffic, but would have provided a local market for his corn, oats, and hay. He was dreaming of the day when his farm would be a feeding station on the road and his house would be a prosperous wayside inn.

To fund the project, the legislature appropriated $15,000 in 1836 and an additional $10,000 in 1837. According to Verhoeff, the amount actually spent was $23,243.40. The work was performed by local contractors, including Samuel's brother Thomas May, who was paid $3,000 to improve a seven-mile stretch of the road from Pikeville to "the top of Island Hill." The greater part of the work consisted of "grading and draining the worst hills, and bridging some of the worst water-courses." Six bridges were built over the Big Sandy between Pikeville and Prestonsburg.

Blasted Hopes: The Depression of 1837-1843

For Samuel May 1836 must have been a very good year. His efforts in the legislature were finally bearing fruit. State money was flowing into the county and local contractors had all the work they could handle. The first four months of 1837 were also good. Then, on May 10, 1837, word came from New York that its banks were suspending specie payments. The Panic of 1837 was underway. When the news reached Frankfort, the Board of Internal Improvement sent word to its engineers to halt work on the Pound Gap Road until they received further orders. None were forthcoming, because the Panic of 1837 was followed by the Great Depression of 1837-1843.

By the early 1840s, according to Fred T. May, Samuel May was in the middle of his own financial crisis. By then he had sold or mortgaged most of his property. In 1841, for example, he sold his saw and grist mill to Richard Deering. In 1842 his brother Thomas paid off $4,750 in mortgages that Samuel owed his creditors and took possession of the May Farm. Following this transaction, Samuel moved his family to a house on First Avenue formerly occupied by John Layne. For the next seven years he continued to accept work as a contractor, and in 1848, according to Henry Scalf, he entered into a short-lived partnership with John Howe and William Foster for the purpose of mining coal. Scalf calls attention to the fact that the contract mentions "coal banks opened by the said party of the first part." In other words, Samuel had been out in the county prospecting for a rich seam.

On August 29, 1849, according to Scalf, Samuel entered into a partnership with Thomas Griffith of Cincinnati. The purpose of the partnership was to "carry on lumbering and coaling business." The two men would be "equal partners in sawing lumber, building boats, and digging coal...Said May has steam saw and grist mill nearly completed." The contract sets out the firm's intentions in detail: "May and Griffy (Griffith) are to saw plank, grind on their grist mill, build boats for plank and coal, buy saw logs, boat gunnells, dig coal, and run the result of their labor to market or sell where they or either of them think best."

This second partnership was also short-lived. Sometime in the fall of 1849, word reached Prestonsburg that gold had been discovered in California. Samuel reacted to this news in a way that must have surprised his friends. He terminated his agreement with Griffith, wound up his other affairs, packed his bags, bade his wife and children goodbye, and headed for the western goldfields. Since digging for gold is hard work and he was beginning to feel his age, he took along his son Andrew and a young man named White. At age sixty-six, Samuel had decided to risk everything on one last roll of the dice

I must admit that I began this project with only the foggiest notion of who Samuel May was or what he represented. In her "Ballad For a Forty-Niner," Gertrude May Lutz asks the following question:

> All manner of men came to Hantown's Hill;
> But why would a man like Samuel May
> Leave his mansion one sunlit day--
> Leave Kentucky for Placerville?

The question is a good one. Putting aside the historical inaccuracy of "Leave his mansion," why did Samuel so suddenly decide to give up everything he had worked for here in Floyd County? On the surface, at least, his decision seems uncharacteristic of a man who had devoted so much of his life to public service. Why did a solid citizen like Samuel May catch the gold-rush fever?

Some will say that the answer is simple--he needed to recoup the losses he had suffered during the Depression of 1837-43. That's true as far as it goes, but there may have been other motives as well. By 1849 Samuel had good reason to be disillusioned with a banking system that favored metropolitan banks over rural ones, especially by its practice of hoarding gold in metropolitan vaults during times of economic crisis. He had seen this happen twice in his lifetime, and the second crisis had cost him his farm and ferry. He knew that if his county was ever to become truly prosperous, it had to acquire large amounts of a commodity that retained its value through good times and bad. I suspect that Samuel went to the goldfields not just for himself and his immediate family, but for his county. He was hoping to strike it rich and give Floyd County its first independent bank.

Although it appears so at first glance, the boldness of his decision wasn't uncharacteristic of the man. Samuel had played long shots from the very beginning. The choice he had made in his youth to tie his destiny to a remote mountain hamlet had been daring for a man of his ability, and so had his later decision to run for the state legislature. Moreover, though I can't prove it, I suspect that he mortgaged his farm in order to pay for his political campaigns. His decision to accept the contract to build the courthouse had certainly been bold, considering the constraints he had to work under. However, for sheer, downright audacity, what can surpass his decision to build an elegant, two-story brick mansion in the middle of nowhere?

When Samuel and his companions traveled to California, the first leg of their trip was probably by steamboat. Carol Crowe-Carraco says that Captain Daniel Vaughan's Tom Scott began regular service to Louisa in 1852. Embarking at that town or Catlettsburg, they probably traveled down the Ohio to Cairo, and then up the Mississippi to St. Louis. From there they probably steamed up the Missouri to Independence, the stepping-off point for the California Trail. From there they would have traveled overland up the Blue River into Nebraska, followed the Platte up into Wyoming, crossed the Sweetwater, went down Wasatch Canyon into the Mormon settlement around Salt Lake, crossed the Nevada desert, mounted the high passes of the Sierra Mountains, and descended into the Sacramento Valley. On the overland leg of their journey they probably traveled by saddle horse, carrying only the essentials--food, bedrolls, changes of linen. Their money they carried in money belts strapped around their waists. You can be sure, too, that they carried Colt revolvers or other weapons.

Relying on the family traditions of Andrew Jackson May, Junior, whom she knew personally, Josephine Fields has told the story of Samuel's final hours. According to her, he and his boys built a cabin near Placerville, a boom-town on the south fork of the American River. "In and around the diggings of Placerville," she says, "they sought their fortune. They found some of the metal that had lured thousands from the East, but no vast fortunes accrued to any of the trio."

For Samuel the hard work and constant exposure soon took their toll. In the winter of 1851, soon after he had passed his sixty-eighth birthday, he developed a fever, went to his cabin, and "lay down to die." With his son and the other boy at his bedside and the cold wind whistling through the chinks, he lingered for several weeks in a state of delirium. At one point he made an unusual request:

> Most of all he wanted coffee. He could smell the aroma of it. He would tell his son, and so Andrew Jackson May rode for miles around the diggings, asking for coffee. But this item was a luxury most prospectors had foregone months ago. However, Andrew's persistent search brought him to a camp larger than the others. Upon asking if there was any of the desired berries, he was told that there was, but that none were for sale.
>
> Tradition has preserved the dialogue between the digger and young May down to this day. "But I must have coffee," Andrew said. "You'll get no coffee here. Coffee is scarce," the digger replied. "But my father is dying, and, most of all, he wants coffee. I do not want it for myself." The digger's countenance changed. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he asked. Andrew got the coffee for his dying father.

Samuel's life ended with a deathbed scene worthy of Dickens. Momentarily revived by the hot coffee, he roused himself and gave the boys directions regarding his burial, the disposition of their gold, and their return to Kentucky. Then, with a great effort, he placed his hands upon their heads and pronounced a benediction. "God bless you both," he whispered. Then he died.

In 1898, during the period when he was practicing law in Tazewell, Virginia, Andrew Jackson May returned to Placerville and tried to locate his father's grave. By then, however, the place had changed so much that he couldn't find it. "As for man," says the Psalmist, "his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth." Since no stone marks Samuel's grave, his real monument is his house. It's up to us to preserve it.

Works Cited or Consulted:

Aler, F. Vernon, History of Martinsburg and Berkeley County, West Virginia (Hagerstown, 1888).

_____, "May House For Possible Inclusion in Historic Register," Floyd County Times, August 1, 1979, p. 1.

Channing, Steven A., Kentucky, A Bicentennial History (New York, 1977).

Chinn, George Morgan, Kentucky Settlement and Statehood, 1750-1800 (Frankfort, 1975).

Clark, Thomas D., A History of Kentucky (Lexington, 1960).

Clift, G. Glen, Second Census of Kentucky (Baltimore, 1982).

Coleman, J. Winston, Historic Kentucky (Lexington, 1968).

Collins, Lewis, History of Kentucky (Cincinnati, 1847).

Crowe-Carraco, Carol, The Big Sandy (Lexington, 1979).

Ely, William, The Big Sandy Valley (Catlettsburg, 1887).

Fields, Josephine, "175 Year Old Home Was Wilderness Mansion," Floyd County Times, 1952, specific date unknown. (Article on file at Prestonsburg Community College Library).

Francis, Tress May, May Genealogy, Southern Branch, 1776-1956 (Unpublished, on file at Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort).

Griffin, Gerald, "Mansion Near Prestonsburg Defying Time," Louisville Courier Journal, July 27, 1954.

Horne, Mrs. Jessie, and her Third Grade Class, "First Settlers on Robinson Creek," 150 Years Pike County Kentucky, 1822-1972 (Pikeville, 1972).

Jillson, Willard R., Old Kentucky Entries and Deeds (Louisville, 1926).

Jillson, Willard R., The Kentucky Land Grants (Louisville, 1925).

May, Fred T., A Brief History of John May and His Descendants in Eastern Kentucky (Unpublished, on file at Prestonsburg Community College).

Moore, Gordon, "Samuel May Died in California Gold Field," Floyd County Times, 1961, specific issue unknown. (Article on file at Prestonsburg Community College Library).

Scalf, Henry P., Kentucky's Last Frontier (Pikeville, 1972).

Scalf, Henry P.,"Thomas P. May of Pike County," Floyd County Times, October 2, 1960.

Scalf, Henry P., "Home That Served Temporarily As Courthouse Is Razed," Floyd County Times,specific date unknown. (Article on file at Prestonsburg Community College library).

Shingler, Pam, "Historic May House May Be Restored," Floyd County Times, January 31, 1990.

Sprague, Stuart, A Pictorial History of Eastern Kentucky (Norfolk, 1986).

Traum, Carolyn, Editor, History of Floyd County, Kentucky (Paducah, 1992).

Verhoeff, Mary, The Kentucky Mountains: Transportation and Commerce, 1750 to 1911, Filson Club Publications Number Twenty-Six.

Wells, Charles C., Annals of Floyd County, Kentucky - 1800-1826 (Baltimore, 1983).

_____, Williamsburg Reproductions, a publication of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (Williamsburg, 1989).